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SUGGESTED FOR MATURE READERS

the SANDMAN

neil gaiman and jon j muth

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When I was a child I lived amid the mulberry groves.
In summer the mulberry trees would stain the green grass
with crimson pulp.

Birds of a thousand colors danced in the sky when I was a boy.
They brightened the day with their intricate songs.
"We are who we choose to be," sang the goldfinch, when the sun
was high.
"I dream about dreams about dreams," sang the nightingale,
under the pale moon.

The girls in my village had lips like plums,
were lovelier by far
Than other girls in other villages,
in the days of my youth.

EXILES

NEIL GAIMAN - Writer
JON J MUTH - Artist & Colorist
DIGITAL CHAMELEON - Seps
TODD KLEIN - Letterer
KAREN BERGER - Editor
SHELLY ROEBERG - Assoc. Editor

****

SANDMAN characters created by Gaiman, Kieth & Dringenberg

Now I am older, I respect the will of the gods. Long ago I passed the examinations, and I was appointed prefect of a whole province.

I have commanded armies, I have advised two emperors. All the wisdom I had was at their disposal, and all that I knew theirs to command.

I have seen many strange things upon my journey.

Passing through the Nan Shan mountains, we were beset by wolves, urged on by a stunted creature they called their king.

When we killed it, the rest lost heart. I have had dreams about the responsibilities of emperors; It has been many leagues since I have heard the nightingale.

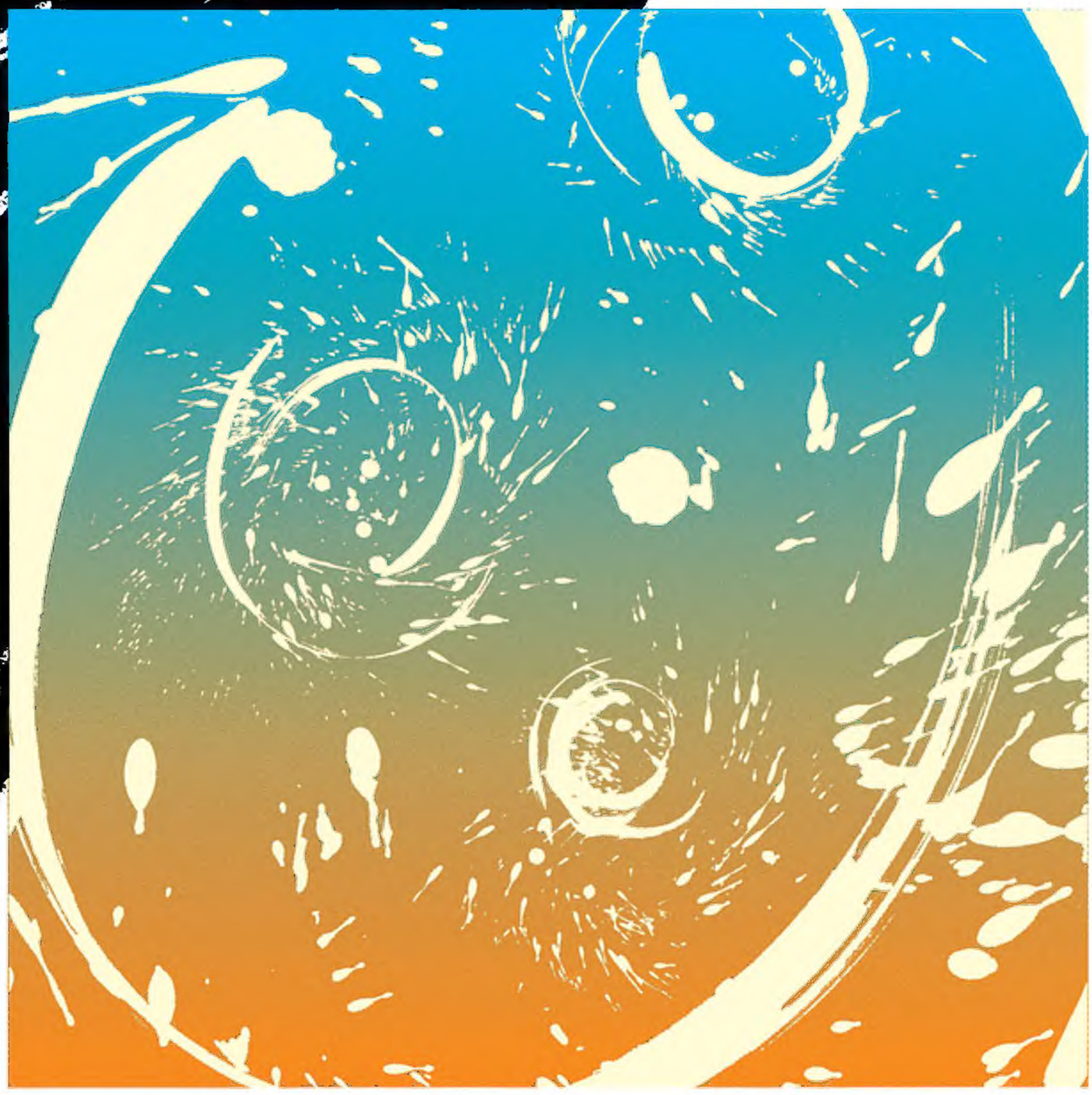
I have had tens of thousands of cash, and a wife, a son, and many concubines.

Only the phoenix arises and does not descend: thus it comes about that now, in the grey of my years, I am sent far from the court, and family, and all I know, into exile.

But I have had dreams about dreams about dreams.

Old friend, in my mind only do
I write you this letter,
But it is a splendid letter, with
perfect brushwork,
Old hands do not shake or cramp
when the letter is written on
the air.

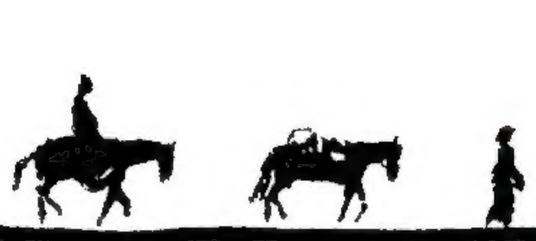
When my son was born the
emperor commanded
fireworks,
They burst on the night sky
like sunflowers of light.
Now my son is dead and I am
in exile.



The desert is grey: Grey sand beneath grey skies,
and I say to my guide, "*This desert is grey,*" and he agrees.
He is a man from a local village.
I ask the name of the desert, but my guide says nothing.
It has a name of ill omen, and ill omens have become my life.

My son allied himself with the people of the White Lotus.
"*You are lucky that I have left you your head,*"
the Emperor told me.

And now I am here, sand in my beard and
eyes and ears, thoughts washing into grey and sand,
Dreams, like sea-foam, washing over everything.



In the village where I found my guide, I encountered a small cat, white as blossom. She led me into the rocks outside the village, and showed me her kittens.

"If we find kittens here, we kill them," said the innkeeper.

"There is little enough food in the village for men."

That night I crept out to the rocks once more, although it was cold, And I placed the smallest of the kittens in my sleeve.

We have barely enough water for this desert-crossing for ourselves.

Only a fool would bring a kitten here.

Three times today he scratched me with his claws.
His tiny eyes are still a muddy blue.

When we stop to relieve ourselves the kitten does also.
I hope he will live to reach the town of Wei, beyond the desert.
It is in Wei that I will live my remaining years.
Soft, soft hisses the desert, like the lapping of the ocean against the pebbles of the beach.

DID YOU SAY SOMETHING, MASTER?

I SAID NOTHING.

I BEG YOUR PARDON, MASTER, I THOUGHT I HEARD YOU SPEAK.

I AM COMPOSING LETTERS THAT I SHALL, PERHAPS, WRITE, WHEN THIS JOURNEYING IS DONE, AND WE ARE SAFE. IT IS HOW I OCCUPY MY MIND AS WE TRAVEL. IS THERE SOMETHING *YOU* DO TO OCCUPY *YOUR* MIND?

I PRAY, MASTER, THAT THE ALL-HIGHEST, AND ALL THE LESSER GODS, WILL SEE US SAFELY ACROSS THE DESERT. ALSO, I HOPE.

I HAVE HEARD THAT ILLUSIONS BREED IN THIS DESERT, THAT GHOSTS AND FOX-SPIRITS WANDER IT, STEALING TRAVELLERS AND LEADING THEM OFF THE PATH.

IT IS TRUE, MASTER.

HOW LONG DO WE HAVE UNTIL NIGHTFALL?

SEVERAL HOURS, MASTER.

AND UNTIL WE CROSS THE DESERT?

AT LEAST ONE MORE DAY, MASTER.

My guide has silver bells sewn to his sleeve.
He has silver bells on the bridle of his horse.
The winds can come up suddenly in the desert.

Those who enter often do not leave again.

The emperor did not order me killed.
Still, he would not grieve unduly if I were reported dead.
I advised him wisely, him and his father before him.

That which is dreamed can never after be undreamed.
I have been travelling for many months:

My heart is heavy within me:
I dream of a cup of wine.

I imagine a porcelain cup.
I pour out the hot wine, and sip, exquisitely.

Alas: we have no wine, and the wine of memory is thin.
Heat and cold, dusks and dawns, this is my lot.

Sometimes I do not believe my journey will ever end.

Sand from the desert
whips across my face.

It feels as if they are whipping
my face with wire whips.

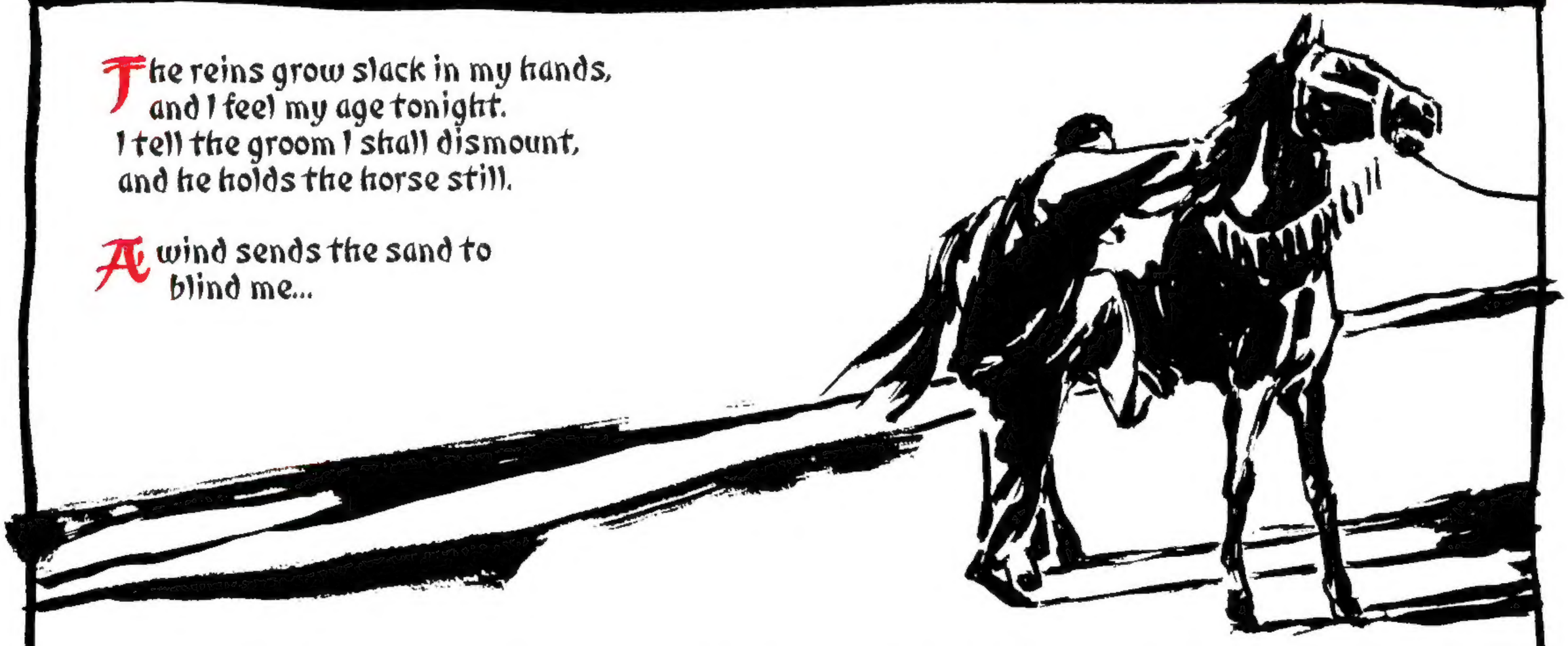
My wife once tortured
a servant girl with
wire whips:

A gold ring was missing, and the girl the only suspect.
My wife killed the girl before she could confess.

Many years later we found the ring,
fallen between two floorboards...

The reins grow slack in my hands,
and I feel my age tonight.
I tell the groom I shall dismount,
and he holds the horse still.

A wind sends the sand to
blind me...



...and I am blinded.

And when my vision
clears, I am alone.

The sages tell us, what
is buried will one day
be uncovered:
If I waited long enough
I would hear the silver
bells tingle,

And we would resume
our journey toward
the town of Wei.

I have seen other illusions before today,
in other deserts,
once, in the far south, I saw the
Imperial Palace.

Each tile and
carving
distinct,
although it
faded as we
approached.

I have seen the swell of the sea
in places where there was
no water.

Now crimson banners proudly wave,
although the wind is still,
And the scent of amber pine resin
fills the air.

I hear the song of the
nightingales, and I
smell crushed mulberries.
And walking toward me
I see my son.

"You are dead," I tell him.

And he bows his head.

"I am dead, my father,"
he tells me.

"They cut off my head
and my hands.
My body was thrown into
a pit, and all my White
Lotus magic could not
save me."

Sand shifts under my feet. I can find no stable footing.

"What is this place?" I ask my son, who is dead.

"Have I come to join you in the black terraces?

"Is that tent the abode of the Prefect of the Dead?"

"My father is still among the living," replies my son.

"Had you been content with life's surfaces, we would all have been happier.

"Nothing good came of your studies into the magical arts."

Anger comes over me then, and I reproach him.

My son bows his head. The kitten hisses, terrified, and flees.

I hurry after.

WHEN YOU WERE ALIVE, YOU WERE ALL MY JOY. NOW YOU ARE DEAD, I SEE YOU ONLY IN MY DREAMS.

FATHER? I AM YOUR SON. *THAT* IS ONLY A KITTEN. WHY DO YOU ABANDON ME TO CHASE AFTER IT?

AND WHEN I AWAKE, MY PILLOW IS WET WITH TEARS. THE KITTEN IS LIVING, AND IT NEEDS MY HELP.

DO NOT GO *THERE!*

WHILE YOU WERE ALIVE YOU DID NOT HEED ***MY*** WARNINGS. I AM ALIVE, AND YOU ARE DEAD. I SHALL TAKE MY OWN COUNSEL.

This is a strange desert: the spars of broken ships are around me.
I walk up a hill, I call consoling words to the kitten.

AI!

WHY ARE YOU HERE, IN THIS HOME OF DEMONS? ARE YOU LOST? OR ARE YOU ALSO A DEMON?

FORGIVE MY BLUNTNESS, BUT I AM AN OLD MAN, AND MY FLESH IS SURE TO BE STRINGY AND LACKING IN TASTE: I DOUBT EVEN A DEMON WOULD RELISH IT.

I am no Demon, honorable Master Li.

YOU KNOW MY NAME? NOW I AM ASSURED YOU ARE A DEMON.

I know many names, Master Li.

Why did you come here, to my tent?

THE EMPEROR HAS SENT ME INTO EXILE.

AND I CAME TO YOUR TENT, LORD, SEEKING MY COMPANION ON THE JOURNEY, A SMALL KITTEN.

Ah: you are with Walks The Night Alone. He is here. Mrrwrr?

=meep=

You are many thousands of leagues, and many hundreds of years, from your own place.

HUNDREDS OF YEARS?

In a manner of speaking. You are in one of the Soft Places, at the edge of The Dreaming. This is a place to which I come, on occasion, to think, and to remember.

MY LORD, NO ONE KNOWS WHAT TOMORROW SHALL BRING. AND IT IS PROBABLE THAT TOMORROW I SHALL HAVE GONE TO MY ANCESTORS.

ALREADY THIS DAY I HAVE SEEN MY SON, WHO WAS KILLED BY THE EMPEROR, AND I TAKE THAT AS AN EXCEEDING ILL OMEN. I KNOW NOT WHAT YOU ARE, BUT I BELIEVE YOU MEAN ME NO HARM.

THUS I HAVE A REQUEST OF YOU: A PRAYER, IF YOU WILL, FROM ONE WHO KNOWS THAT, WHILE THE GODS LISTEN TO AND ANSWER ALL PRAYERS, IT IS NOT UNHEARD-OF FOR THE ANSWER TO BE "NO."

Speak on.

FOR MANY LEAGUES NOW, I HAVE BEEN DREAMING OF A SMALL CUP OF WINE. NOT A SKIN OF WINE, FOR A SKIN OF WINE WOULD MAKE ME MERRY, AND FOOLISH. MERELY A CUP OF WINE, TO WARM ME.

Some time from now, or some time long ago, a young man gave me water in this desert, although he had precious little to give.

It would be ungracious of me to give you less than he gave me.

Here.

THAT WAS GOOD. GOOD AS MY DREAMS.

Keep your coin, Master Li. Give it to one who needs it.

I SHALL GIVE IT TO THE *NEXT* BEGGAR I MEET, MY LORD.

HERE. ***PLEASE.*** YOU MUST BE PAID.

There was once a sage who loved his only son as much as you loved yours.

One day the son died, and yet the father shed no tears and made no mourning.

When they asked why, he told them, I did not mourn him before he was born, and I will not mourn him now he is gone.

What do you think of that?

I THINK THAT WAS *FOOLISHNESS*.

YOU MOURN, FOR IT IS PROPER TO MOURN.

BUT YOUR GRIEF SERVES YOU: YOU DO NOT BECOME A SLAVE TO GRIEF. YOU BID THE DEAD FARE-WELL, AND YOU CON-TINUE.

Indeed.

=meep=

Mrrr? Very well. If you must. Fare you well, Walks The Night Alone.

It seems that you are leaving now, Master Li.

LORD? IS THERE A WAY *OUT* OF THIS DESERT?

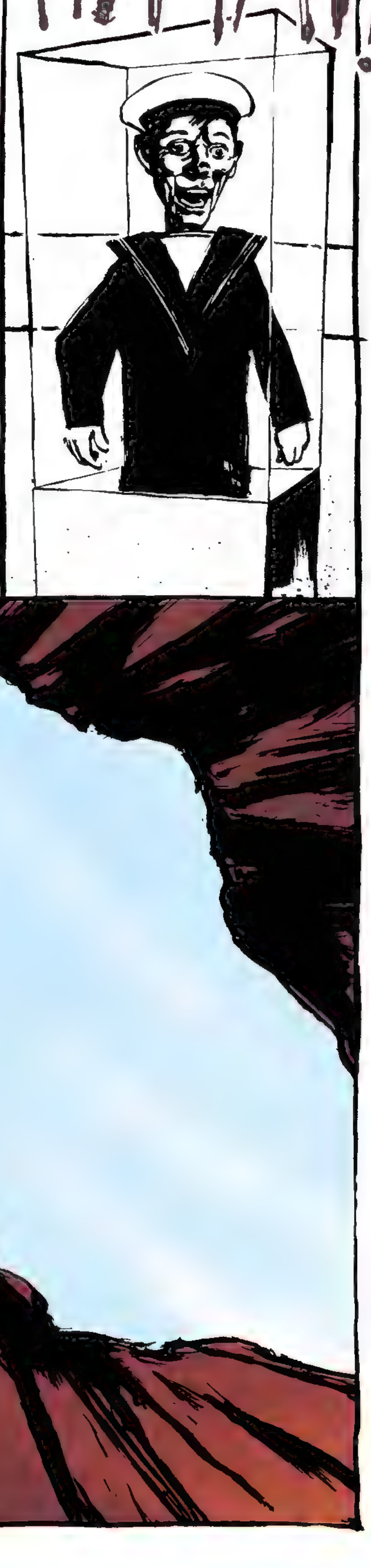
I follow the kitten through
the shifting sands,
Stumble on old legs:
I feel older than P'eng.
And then I hear the
murmur of voices.

And from across the plain I hear
the sounds of madness.

HA!HA! HA! HA!

HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!

HA! HA! HA! HA!



I cross the bridge, telling myself
that I am dreaming.

As the yellow dusk thickens, my thoughts are stirred and troubled.

Once across the bridge I find myself confused:

Have I crossed the bridge at all? Am I again experiencing what I have already experienced?

I cannot say, and truly do not know. For the second time my feet take me toward a tent.

I hear low voices, distant riders, far-off thunder.

Greetings, Master Li.

AND TO YOU, MASTER. — PARDON THE CONFUSION OF AN OLD MAN, BUT HAVE WE NOT MET BEFORE?

We have met, Master Li.

THERE WAS A MAN ACROSS THE CHASM WHO COULD HAVE BEEN YOUR BROTHER.

You met me, Master Li. A long time ago.

...I SEE.

You are wise.

meep

You too, brave one.

Will you walk with me, Master Li?

I WILL DO AS MY LORD REQUIRES.

They rode toward us in a cloud of dust.
The jangle of harness and bit,
the clash of spear against shield,
Silver whips glinted at the horses' flanks,
The pounding of hooves echoed like thunder across the sands.

ARE YOU THE LORD OF THIS REALM?

I am.

MY LORD, WE HAVE BEEN RIDING FOR *SO* LONG A TIME.

That is why I am here. The time has come for you to leave this place.

MY LORD... WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO US *NOW?* WILL YOU RETURN US TO THE TIMES AND THE PLACES FROM WHICH WE CAME?

OR WILL WE CRUMBLE TO DUST, AND, FORGOTTEN, BECOME ONE WITH THE DESERT?

OMNIA MUTANTUR, NIHIL INTERIT...?

Perhaps.

Flames flicker in the whiteness of his robe.
He shakes his head slowly. I cannot tell if he is smiling.
Perhaps he smiles. And then he turns away.
There is the sound of summer thunder, distant and gentle.

We are alone, in the silence, only the hiss of the wind on the sand.

I have no liking for prisons, Master Li.

Sometimes I suspect that we build our traps ourselves, then we back into them, pretending amazement the while.

That this is the way of life, from the All-Highest down to the meanest creature in creation...

But whether this is the case or no, it is still a worthy thing to open cages.

It is still a virtuous act to free the imprisoned.

SO THE SAGES TELL US.

Tools, of course, can be the subtlest of traps. One day, I know, I must smash the emerald.

MY LORD?

But that day can wait.

Where are you going to, Master Li?

INTO EXILE, LORD. THE EMPEROR NO LONGER HAS NEED OF MY COUNSEL.

I see. I am sorry.

Would the venerable Master Li do honor to me and my modest realm by consenting to act as a ___ counselor?

To come to my humble castle and stay for as long as he wishes?

YOU HONOR ME WITH YOUR OFFER, LORD.

I AM GOING INTO EXILE: SENTENCED TO BE PREFECT IN THE FARTHEST OUTPOST OF THE EMPIRE. I AM QUITE AN OLD MAN, AND THE EMPEROR IS STILL A YOUNG MAN. THEREFORE I DO NOT EXPECT EVER TO RECEIVE A MESSAGE TELLING ME I CAN RETURN HOME.

I SHALL NOT LIVE TO SEE MY WIFE AGAIN, OR THE VILLAGE OF MY BIRTH.

BUT I HAVE SPENT MY LIFE IN OBEDIENCE TO THE WILL OF THE EMPEROR, AND THE EMPEROR HAS SENT ME TO THE VILLAGE OF WEI. I ***WILL*** DO AS MY EMPEROR HAS COMMANDED.

Omnia mutantur, nihil interit.

"Everything changes, but nothing is truly lost."

Fare you well, Master Li.

AS YOU SAY, SIRE.

LORD -- WHAT WAS IT THE BARBARIAN SAID, AS THE RIDERS VANISHED?

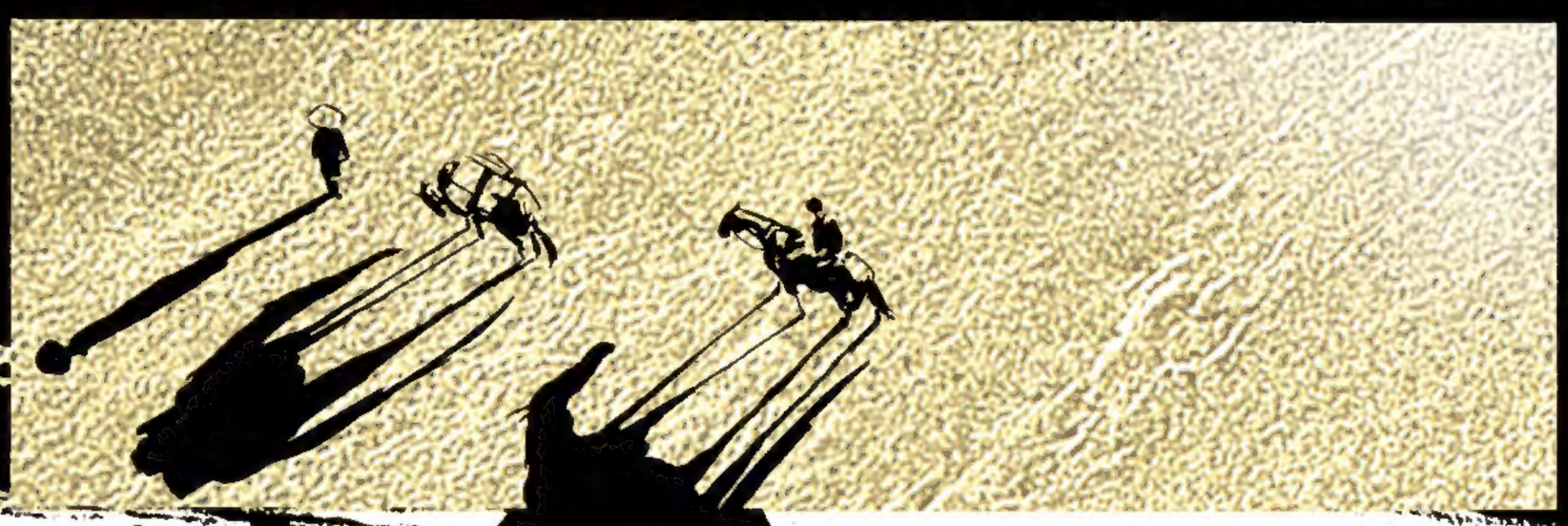
I understand.

If you change your mind... tell the kitten. He will tell me.

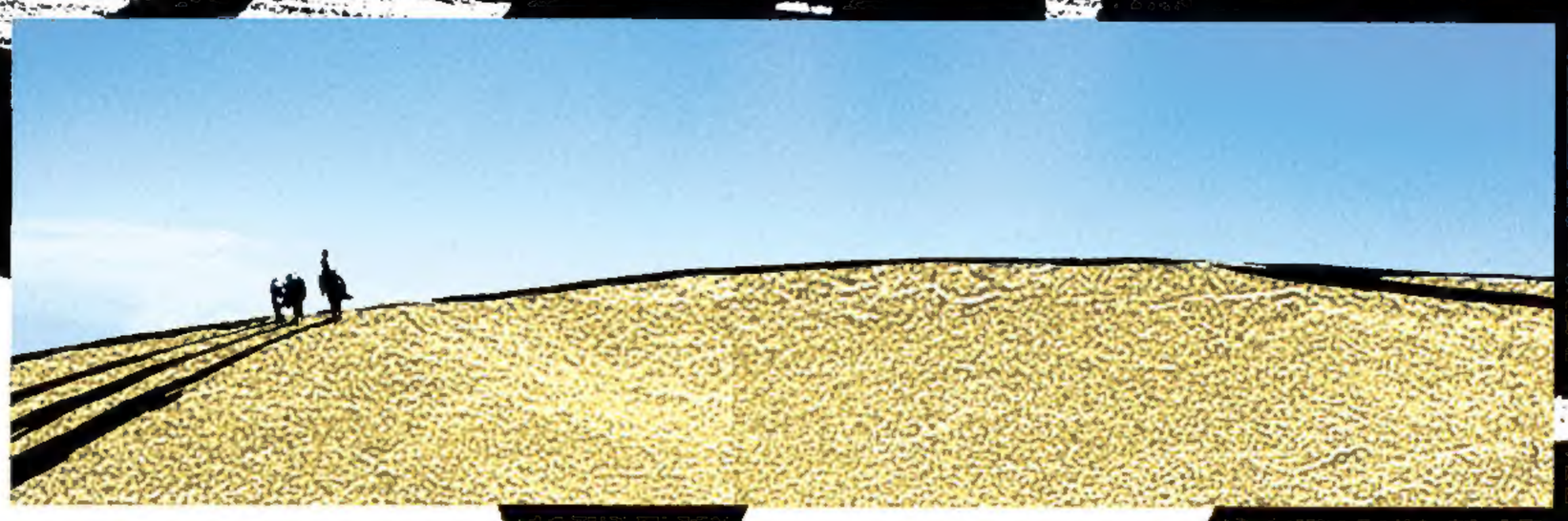
HAI!
My guide had thought me taken by the desert, Stolen by ogres and fox-spirits, stolen by demons or ghosts.
The kitten saved my life, making me cry out.
I think of the cry a newborn babe gives, arriving in the world.
My beard and clothes are crusted with sand, my body is sore and aching.
Was it a dream? Or just a dream? Or madness?
But truth or no, still I behaved in the correct manner,
And correctness in behavior is one of the cardinal virtues.
I place the kitten in my sleeve once more.
I have saved his life, as he saved mine, and am responsible for him.
We cannot evade our responsibilities.
That which is dreamed Can never be lost, can never be un-dreamed.

I shall truly set brush to paper when I reach the village of Wei, old friend.
My thoughts go to you; and to my wife, alone and disgraced in the Capital;
And to my son.

I am banished to the grey waste at the end of the world,
but I mourn myself no longer; I cherish the pain in my hand.
I imagine the taste of the mulberries in the violet dusk.
And tomorrow I shall arrive in the town of Wei.



Only the phoenix arises
and does not descend.
And everything changes.



And nothing is
truly lost.

END

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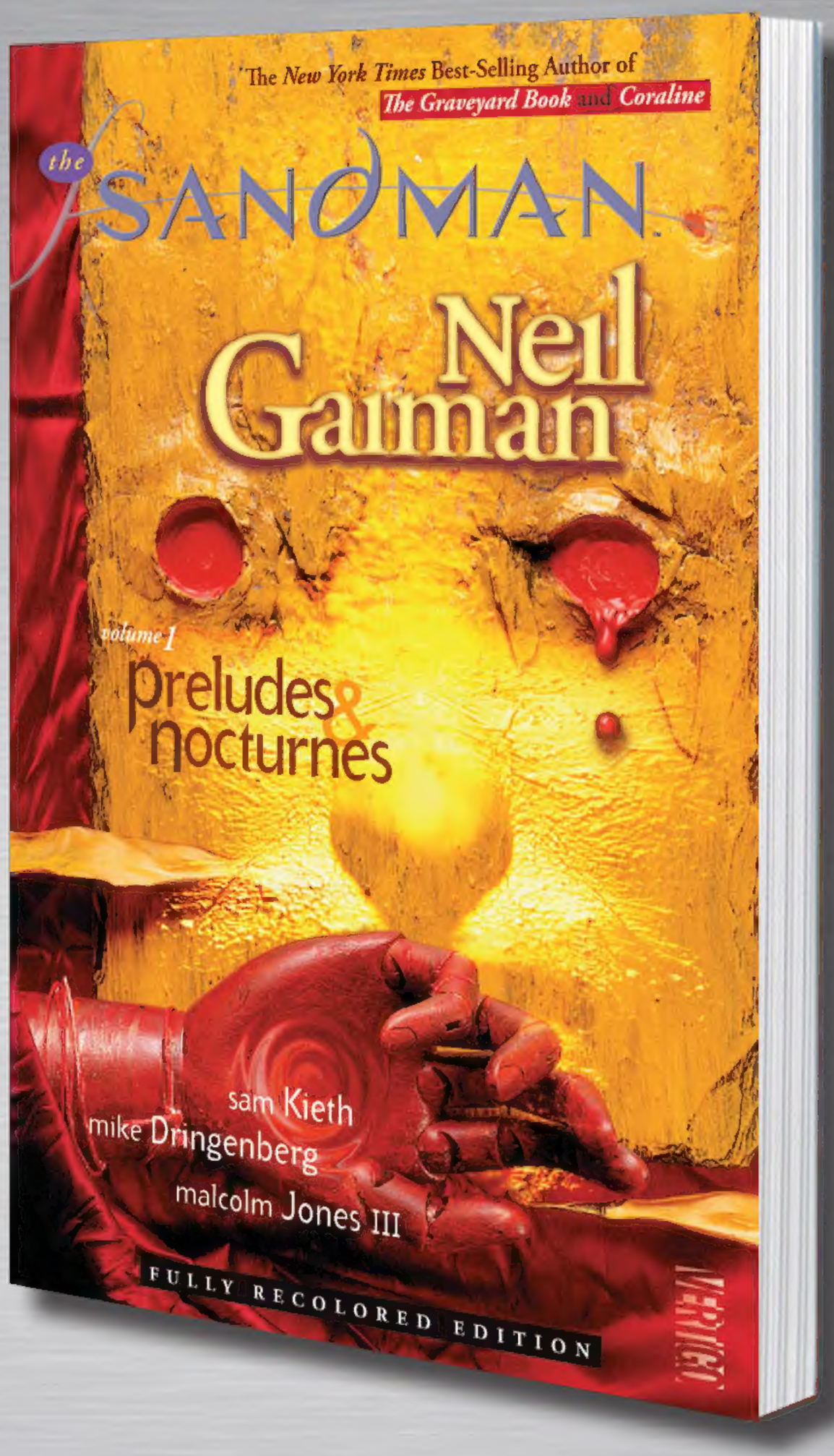

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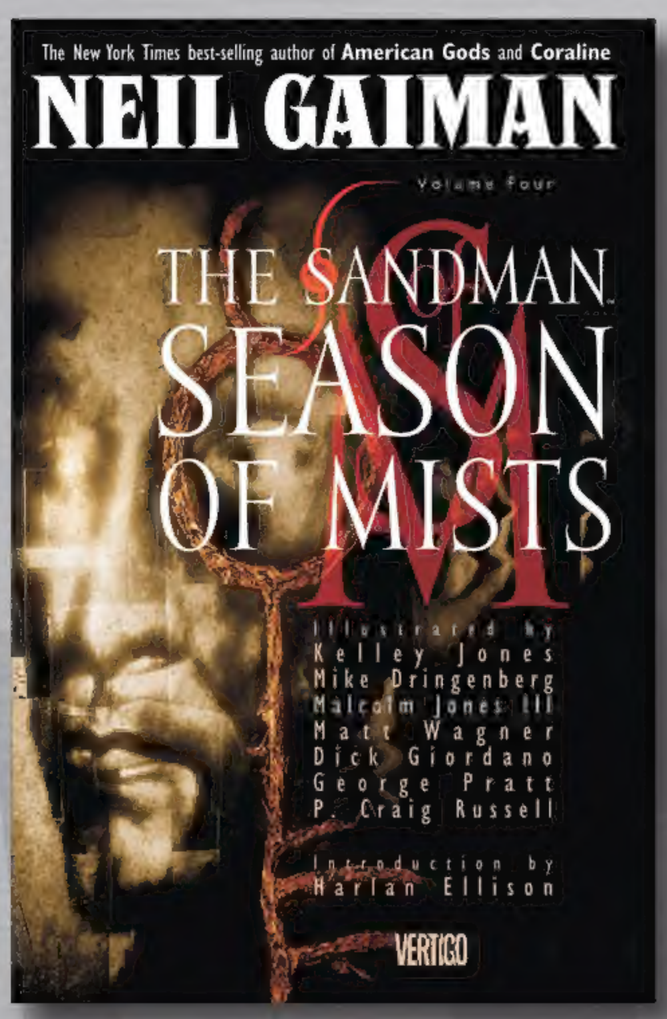

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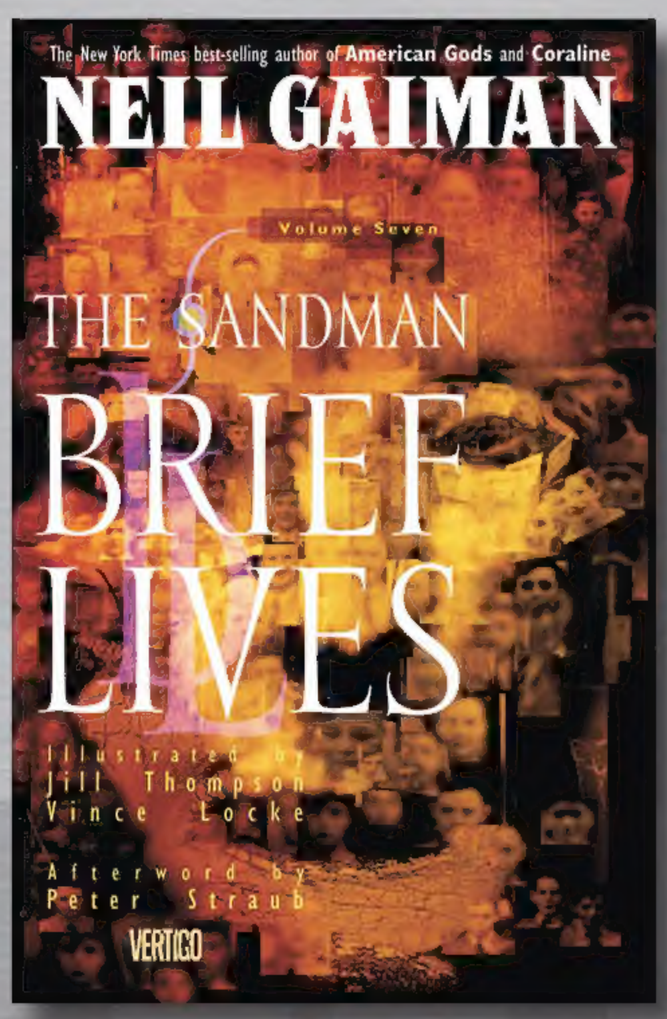

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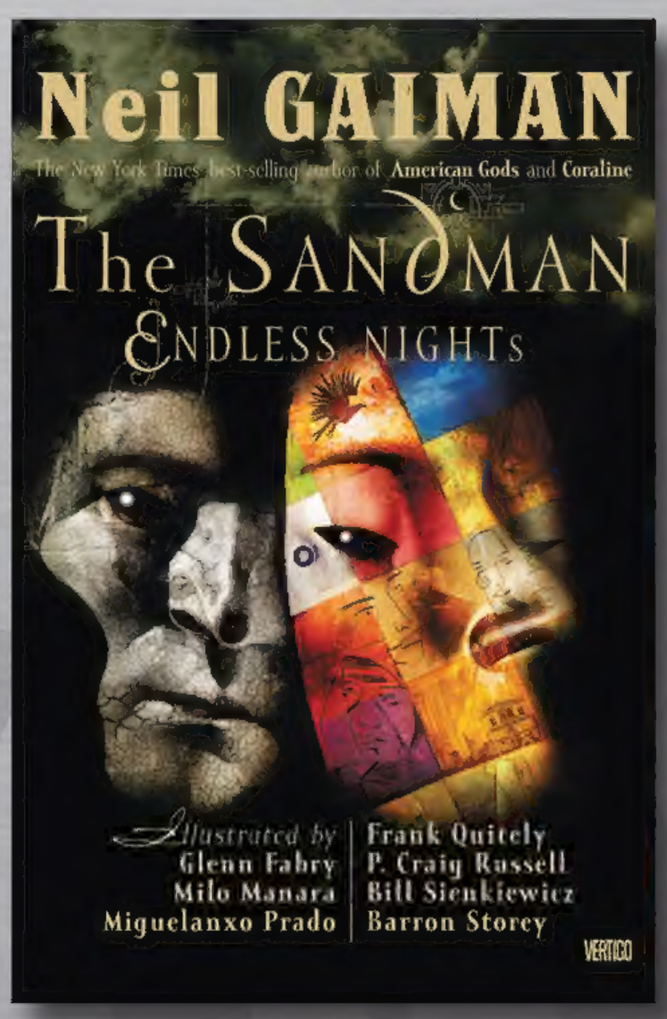

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